

*On the summit of the highest gallery,  
further up than the central rose window,  
there was a great flame that rose between  
the two bell towers amid whirlwinds of  
sparks, a great, furious, and wild flame,  
a tongue of which the wind at times  
blew up into the smoke.*

(Victor Hugo - *Notre-Dame de Paris* - 1831)

## *Confutatis maledictis, flammis acribus addictis ...*

or an Eternal Flame?

By Yves-Bernard Debie

The night of April 15, 2019, will be remembered with sadness for the fire at the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris. More than eight hundred years of history and culture were consumed by flames on account of the negligence of those responsible for a renovation project that ironically was undertaken to preserve the structure. Building the future while preserving what the past has given us, and especially the universal treasures produced through art, is another project, and one that is ongoing, permanent, and much more complex.

Around the world, self-righteous militants are busy relighting the embers of censorship and are fanning and feeding them with big chunks of history, culture, and the arts. It is a kind of fervor that grafts itself onto the legitimate desire to purge our societies of the evils that have always corrupted them. In the name of the necessary struggles against racism, xenophobia, and sexism, these fraudulent ayatollahs want to control cultural expression and pass judgment on the conformity of art.

It takes less than ten minutes to get from the cathedral of Notre Dame de Paris to the Sorbonne, and on March 25, 2019, it took only a handful

of pseudo-antiracist militants to block the performance of Aeschylus' *The Suppliants* on the grounds that "white" actors had been made up to play "black" characters. Welcome to our twenty-first century! The entire work was thus thwarted and crushed in the name of convictions that, while fundamentally respectable, are nonetheless intellectually completely unfounded, misplaced, and unsupportable.

You may recall that in 2014, a group petitioned the administrative court in Paris to block the performance of *Exhibit B*, which a pop singer on a

French TV show had compared to *Mein Kampf*. The attempt to ban Brett Bailey's piece was rightfully rejected, and it went on as planned. However, neither the affirmation of its legality nor the support expressed by the French Minister of Culture at the time, as well as that of the mayor of Paris condemning "all attempts at intimidation and censorship," were enough to prevent the cancellation of the scheduled performances at the Gérard Philipe theater in Saint-Denis.

London, Berlin, and other European cities have been subject to the same dictates. Accused of being guilty of blackface or, if the actors are not made up, of whitewashing or colorblindness, theater pieces have been cancelled or denied public funding. This was the case for a play in Canada called *Kanata*, which came under pressure from autochthonous minorities, even though it pointedly evokes the persecutions endured by the Native Americans, who have been denied their own culture.

Unfortunately, the visual arts have fared similarly. The somewhat greater distance between Notre Dame and the Assemblée Nationale building was not enough to keep a completely unjustified polemic from rising up in the world's capital of



arts and culture. A historic work by artist Hervé Di Rosa representing and commemorating the abolition of slavery in France in 1794 decorates the wall of the hall through which the tribunes walk to the meeting hall of the Palais Bourbon. The fresco depicts two black figures against a background of broken chains rendered in a manner evocative of comic books, a style for which this master of the free figuration style is known. The canvas, which memorializes the abolition of slavery by legislative decree, had, until recently, not aroused anyone's ire. However, beginning last

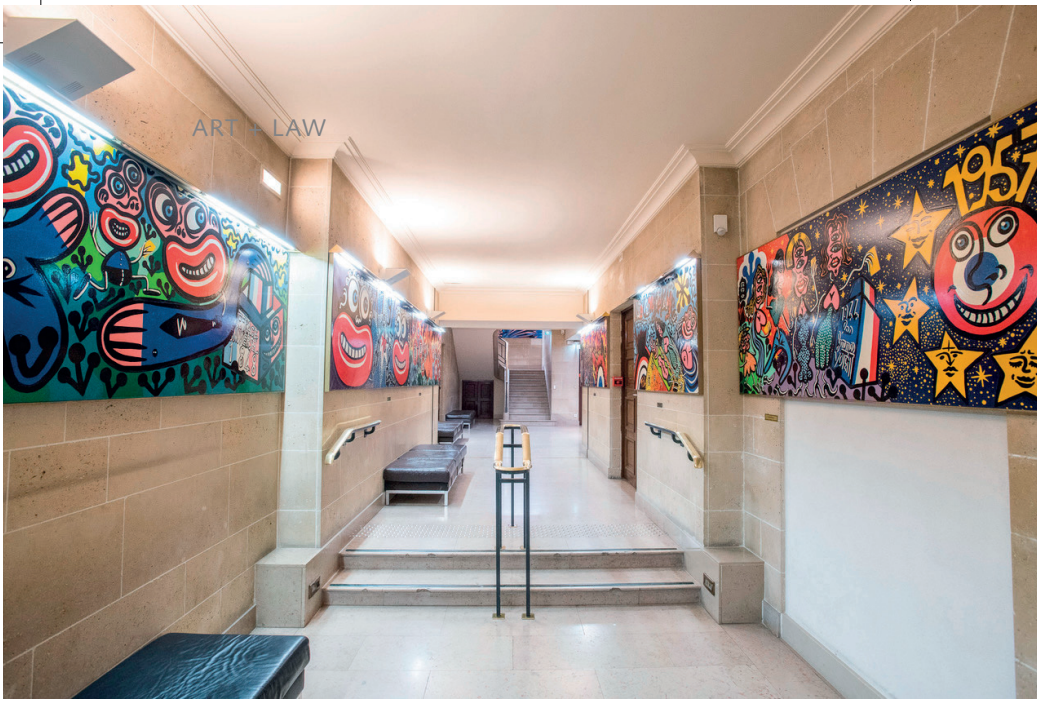
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April, a petition has been circulated and articles have been written demanding the removal of the work on the grounds that it “trivializes racism” at the Assemblée Nationale. The organizers of this petition denounce the manner in which the artist chose to represent the “faces of the Blacks, with bug-eyes, oversized lips, toothy grins, and with imagery that seems to have been drawn from Tintin in the Congo and advertisements for Bannania chocolate.”

The subject of this artwork, let us recall, is incontrovertibly the abolition of slavery in 1794, and thus it is clearly the artistic approach, the artist's choice and vision of the subject, that are being judged and deemed non-conforming with contemporary ideology. Did someone say “censorship”?

The author of this controversial work has unsuccessfully sought to defend himself, but has failed to convince the self-appointed judges of what is “artistically correct” by invoking his other works, which are populated with “grotesque forms, often drawn from popular imagery” that are rendered in a codified manner. “Whatever their color, their gender, or their other physical characteristics, my characters all have big red lips.” His arguments were made to no avail.





Currently, although the painting has remained in place, the photograph of it on the Assemblée Nationale’s website has been taken down. Is there still such a thing as freedom of artistic expression? Examples abound that suggest that the answer to that question is no.

In the same vein—and what follows is hardly an exhaustive compilation—what are we to think of the removal by the city of Los Angeles on November 10, 2018, of a statue of Christopher Columbus that had been standing near Grand Park since 1973 because it was seen as a “symbol of oppression” by Native American groups? Or of the suppression by the University of Notre Dame in Indiana, one of the oldest and most prestigious institutions of higher learning in the United States, of frescos of Columbus painted in the late nineteenth century because they might convey a distorted image of American colonial history? San Francisco took down a statue whose showing was purportedly offensive to Native Americans. These decisions were not isolated, and even the city of New York, which is certainly not known for its sectarianism, finds itself embroiled in similar controversies with regard to several statues of Theodore Roosevelt and, once again, of Columbus. Finally, a poem published in the magazine *The Nation* was attacked because its author, who was not himself handicapped, used the word “crippled” in his writing.

Clearly, many arbitrary sentences have been handed down in the name of a communalist vision of art. This has been done without taking into account the artistic value of the condemned works or their creators’ intentions, much less their posthumous rights.

ABOVE: View of a corridor in the Assemblée Nationale Française decorated with paintings by Hervé Di Rosa created in 1991 titled *L’histoire en peinture de l’Assemblée nationale* (*The History of the Assemblée Nationale in Painting*).

© Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Pierre Schwartz.

BELOW: Detail of the above work by Hervé Di Rosa.

© Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Pierre Schwartz.

Freedom of expression, which notably includes artistic expression, is, except in cases where it is flagrantly abused, protected by legislation in all democratic countries. In the United States, although the freedom of artistic creation is not covered by a specific autonomous statute, it is part of the freedom of expression guaranteed by the First Amendment to the Constitution. In Europe, the European Court of Human Rights is one among several institutions that supervises and enforces the right of free expression guaranteed by Paragraph 1 of Article 10, which is one of the fundamental pillars of its democratic society. In a decision in the case of the *Vereinigung Bildender Künstler* (Visual Artists’ Guild) vs. Austria on January 25, 2007, the court stated that “those who create, interpret, disseminate, or exhibit works of art contribute to an exchange of ideas and opinions that is vital to a democratic society. An obligation on the state’s part not to impinge unduly on their freedom of expression arises from that fact.”

As we witness this struggle between the opposing forces of an attempt to communalize art through censorship on the one hand and the existence of a legal arsenal that guarantees freedom of expression to creators on the other, we conclude by reminding artists and their public and private sponsors that they are subject only to the laws approved by the representatives of the governments of the nations of which they are citizens. They are not compelled to comply with any other regulations nor are they obliged to give in to ideological intimidation and accusatory imprecations that purport to represent progress, when they in truth belong to another era and negate the vision that a free spirit may have of an open world in which diversity and differences are beautiful, natural, and unforced.

“Good night, censors. That will be all.”

“ Those who create, interpret, disseminate, or exhibit works of art contribute to an exchange of ideas and opinions that is vital to a democratic society ”

